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The Liberty Incident: the 1967 Israeli Attack on the U.S. Navy Spy Ship, by A.J. Cristol. Washington, DC: Brassey's Inc., 2002. 201 pages. Epilogue to p. 205. Appendixes to p. 272. Bibl. to p. 294. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Richard B. Parker

This is the most thorough study to date of the attack on the USS Liberty by Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats on June 8, 1967, during the June War. Cristol, a former Navy flyer is Chief Judge Emeritus of the Federal Bankruptcy Court in Southern Florida. Previous books on the subject by American writers suffer from over-reliance on American versions of the event and insufficient attention to Israeli sources. Judge Cristol is the first American writer to plumb the latter as well as the American sources thoroughly, and to subject what he has been told to rigorous analysis. He has conducted over 500 interviews on the subject in Israel, the United States, Egypt, and England; and he has done a great deal of archival research. He provides a profusion of both technical details and excerpts from the official record as well as explanatory illustrations. His conclusion is that the attack was

an accident arising from a series of mistakes by all parties, starting with the fact that the Liberty should not have been where it was.

Many people in Washington and elsewhere are persuaded today that the attack was deliberate — not an accident due to the fog of war, but was done for reasons that vary with the speaker. Such reasons range from preventing American eavesdropping on Israeli plans to invade Syria, to hiding the alleged fact that the Israelis were massacring Egyptian prisoners of war in al-Arish. The latest British television special on the subject produced for the BBC by Source Films takes the story a giant step further in leading the viewer to believe that the attack was part of "Operation Cyanide," a US-Israeli plot, involving James Angleton of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to bring down Egyptian President Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir. The attack was staged to look like it was Egyptian, and the men on the Liberty were to be sacrificed in order to justify US retaliation against Egypt. (I have three cameo appearances in this film, in which I say that the US Sixth Fleet had been about to launch an attack on Egypt after the Liberty was hit — I was actually repeating what David Nes, the US chargé d'affaires in Cairo at the time, had told me over the telephone during an interview about a warning message we had received on the afternoon of June 8 — I have no recollection of that message myself, although as Political Counselor of the embassy I would have seen everything that Nes did.) The film goes on to say that two US Navy F-4s loaded with nuclear weapons had been launched, but then were recalled on orders from Secretary of Defense Robert Macnamara and President Lyndon Johnson. Judge Cristol points out that F-4s were not configured to carry such weapons, and Macnamara denies issuing the recall order. Obviously, there are many claims and statements to be sorted out here.

In the film, the Operation Cyanide plot story is conflated with the allegations in

Stephen Green's *Taking Sides* that US Air Force aircraft flew reconnaissance missions for Israel during the war. I thought that I had shown the falsity of that allegation pretty clearly in an article in the Autumn 1997 issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, but Source Films treats seriously the claims of the source of the story, a man named Greg Reight. In a further touch out of Oliver Stone's Hollywood film *JFK*, an anonymous Air Force intelligence analyst, of whom we see only the back and an opaque silhouette, says he was sure that President Johnson was seeing what he saw, but gives no details. The willingness of conspiracy enthusiasts to believe the worst has been amplified by the mishandling of official information about the incident, and the superficiality of the investigation that was conducted by the Johnson administration. My impression at the time was that Lyndon Johnson wanted the incident to be buried so that it would not trouble US-Israel relations or his support among Jewish voters.

Plots aside, was the attack an accident? Few who were in the foreign policy establishment at the time believe it was. President Lyndon Johnson reportedly did not. Secretary of State Dean Rusk did not. Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms and Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia, Lucius Battle have their doubts today. And, contrary to what Cristol seems to have been told, so did at least some senior officers of the National Security Agency, which was running the signals operation on the ship. It was from one of the latter that I first heard the explanation that the purpose of the attack was to prevent our learning about the planned invasion of Syria. (Cristol pretty convincingly shoots down that hypothesis, by the way.)

Similarly, among former US Foreign Service colleagues and academic friends there seems to be a clear majority agreeing that the attack must have been deliberate. As Richard Helms said at a conference on the war in 1992, "The external

evidence was relatively clear. It was a bright sunny day. The American flag was flying, and the plane came in and attacked ... whatever the Israeli case may be, they've got that case. We've got our case."¹

None of the prominent disbelievers spoke up publicly in 1967, and the story would have died had the survivors of the attack not organized and kept it alive. Most notable among their efforts has been the book *Assault on the Liberty* (New York, Random House, 1979) by James Ennes, Jr., an officer who was wounded in the attack. His graphic description of the attack is disturbing, and his book is a major element of the gospel for those who believe the attack was deliberate. I am told that the story is being taken up by the American Legion, and that some of my former Foreign Service colleagues are circulating a petition calling for yet another Congressional investigation.

Why was the Liberty there? Both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the NSA knew that the vessel should not be where it was and had ordered it to withdraw. According to a US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee report of May 18, 1971 that Cristol cites (p. 171), a total of five messages (Ennes says there were six) were sent to the ship on the morning of June 8 telling it to clear out of the combat zone, but none was received until after the attack. The fault rests with the armed forces communication system, or systems, but that does not explain why the messages were not sent on June 5 or 6, soon after the war started instead of waiting until it was almost over. Nor does it explain why NSA officials in Washington, who should have been following the ship's movements, did not use their own channels to warn the ship. Someone was asleep at the switch.

While the crew seems to have been

1. Richard B. Parker (ed.), *The Six-Day War: A Retrospective* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1996), p. 278.

quite relaxed about their situation (men were sunbathing on deck the morning of the attack), Cristol says (p. 31) that the captain, William McGonagle, knew he was in a potentially dangerous situation. He had discretionary authority to leave the war zone (p. 195) why didn't he use it? Cristol says that "it has been written" (he does not say where) that McGonagle did not know the reason for the Liberty's mission, which apparently was to spy on Egyptian communications, and apparently was persuaded by the commander of the cryptological complement, Lt. Commander David E. Lewis, to remain in harm's way. He cites Ennes as having said that Lewis told McGonagle withdrawing over the horizon would degrade his capabilities by 80 percent. But since the war on the Egyptian front was all but over (Egypt accepted a cease-fire on June 8), there was not much to listen to. Further explicitness about this aspect of the case would be useful.

Granted that the ship should not have been there, the Israelis should not have attacked it. Their explanation is that the Liberty had been spotted and correctly identified early in the morning on June 8th and had been marked on the plotting board at Naval Headquarters in Haifa, but that the marker had been removed by mistake when there was a change of shifts. When the vessel was spotted again, it was mis-identified and was attacked. The incompetence of the Israeli navy and its desire to see some action were both factors at work here. This explanation is plausible, but does not satisfy the critics who say the flag was flying, visibility was excellent, and the silhouette of the ship was unmistakable. Cristol points out that there was little wind and the flag must have been drooping, hardly a prominent marker. (Ennes, on the other hand, says that in the morning, at least, the ship's speed, plus the breeze added up to an 8-knot wind and the flag was extended. Cristol provides a gun sight photo that shows smoke going straight up, indicating that there was no wind to speak of. This may stimulate some controversy. He also points out

that the pilot of a jet fighter bomber would be firing at such a great speed and distance that he would not have seen the flag. Nor would it be prudent to assume that even if the flag had been seen, this would protect the ship. Not only is there a long history of naval misuse of flags to deceive opponents, but the Israeli torpedo crews that attacked did not even recognize the flag when a larger one was displayed. Nor, Cristol argues and demonstrates with an illustration, would the ship's silhouette have been all that distinctive to those who attacked it.

Those who are interested in this story will want to read this book. It is not as well edited as it might be and some passages are not as clear as one would like. It also contains a few factual errors (e.g., the American Embassy in Cairo was not under siege by street mobs, as stated on p. 65, and evacuation of US diplomats from Cairo had not been completed before the Liberty arrived, as stated on p. 28). However, these minor errors do not affect the author's argument. They are vastly overshadowed by the wealth of details Cristol provides, details that confirm this reviewer's longheld belief that the Israelis were not so stupid as to knowingly attack an American naval ship, whatever its mission. The conspiracy advocates will not be convinced, but those with an open mind may be.

Ambassador Richard B. Parker was Political Counselor of the American Embassy in Cairo on June 8, 1967.